They dance ecstatically in the street, a kaleidoscope of saffron robes, white dotis, and multicoloured saris accompanied by the clash of cymbals and reverberation of drums. They sell translations of the Bhagavad Gita and other sacred Indian texts, often in airports or public parks, and entice visitors with offers of free succulent vegetarian feasts. They are the Hare Krishnas, members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). And while the vivid images and memories of their dancing, book ministry, and food distribution are all correct, they miss an important aspect of the Hare Krishna movement. Though born from the hippie counterculture of the United States of America in the mid-1960s, and spread throughout the world during the turbulent decade that followed, the roots of ISKCON derive from its founder’s experience in colonial India, and one must read the Hare Krishna’s engagement with the West and Western culture through that lens.

Few outside the Hare Krishna movement realize that the nature of science and its relationship to the religious message that ISKCON offered operated at the centre of the group’s theological agenda. In the written advertisement that he brought with him as he first sailed to America, the movement’s founder, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), declared ISKCON’s mission as spreading “all over the world for scientific knowledge of God”. Later, Bhaktivedanta published a set of his essays under the title The Science of Self-Realization, (Reprinted in 1979b) and he discussed science in many of his lectures, lessons, articles, and commentaries. A set of his lectures, published as Life Comes from Life focused exclusively on the topic of science. (1979a) Bhaktivedanta’s disciples followed in his footsteps, authoring dozens of articles in ISKCON’s official organ Back to Godhead that treated the topic of science, as well as considered the subject in their own lectures
and teaching materials. One such disciple, Svarupa Damodara dasa, even published a book-length treatment of science and its relation to ISKCON’s religious worldview, The Scientific Basis of Krishna Consciousness. (1974) In addition, the group discussed science in countless pamphlets, brochures, and posters, making the topic of science a common one throughout the movement’s ephemera. There can be little doubt that science occupied an important part of Bhaktivedanta’s, and subsequently ISKCON’s, religious world.¹

Yet Bhaktivedanta and his ISKCON disciples represented science in a distinct, even peculiar, manner. For Bhaktivedanta and his movement, ‘science’ meant two things. First, it meant the science of the post-Enlightenment West, characterized by its methodological empiricism and insistence on naturalistic explanations. Bhaktivedanta and his movement criticized science in this form due to both of these characteristics, as well as called into question the moral value of science and scientists in the West. Yet the movement adopted a second view of science, that which they called Vedic science, or the ancient science of Krishna Consciousness. As I explore in greater detail here, this second formulation of science represented a completely alternative scientific paradigm, to use the language of Thomas Kuhn (1970) Vedic science rejected empiricism and instead valued the teachings of sacred texts. It rejected materialistic explanations, and instead offered spiritual ones. Yet in calling Vedic science a science, and in identifying ISKCON with that Vedic science, Bhaktivedanta attempted to solidify a sense of legitimacy. As I argue here, the kernel of ISKCON’s engagement with science emerged from Bhaktivedanta’s attempt to seize the mantle of the authority of science and deploy it to legitimize and support his inchoate new religious movement. However his approach to science cannot be understood apart from his own experience in India and his encounter with colonialism and the modern Western scientific system that colonialism introduced to India.

The future A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada was born September 1, 1896 with the given name Abhay Charan De into an

¹ This chapter focuses on Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON, but is drawn from my larger study. For greater attention to the place of science in the work of Bhaktivedanta’s disciples, please see Zeller, B. E., 2010. Prophets and Protons: New Religious Movements and Science in Late Twentieth-Century America. New York: New York University Press.